

# Constellations for Adoption

**By Mary Rentschler, M.Ed.**

"Every child will have lifelong connections to a caring, nurturing family," says the vision statement for a *website*<sup>1</sup> that comes up in a google search. What a good thing! When a child's biological parents are unable to care for them, adoption is often a happy solution to an urgent problem. But although most adoptions are successful, with children benefitting from the protection and care of a loving family that supports their growing into well-adjusted adults, there can be hidden complications. These are not the ordinary problems of parents and children, but come from the experience of adoption itself. The biological parents, the adoptive parents, the adopted child as well as their siblings, are all faced with emotional realities that go beyond the ordinary difficulties of being part of a family.

When problems arise in a child's adjustment into an adoptive family, looking at various issues through a systemic lens can be helpful. From a Family Constellations perspective, adoption is not mainly a practical solution to a social problem, but more a challenge that involves fate, past generations, and the family soul.

In constellations with several thousand families, Bert Hellinger recognized archaic systemic elements that exert a trans-generational influence on the behavior of individual family members. In the early history of our species these elements functioned to protect individuals and ensure the survival of clans and tribes. Hellinger refers to these deeply embedded unconscious structures as "Orders of Love."

Foremost among these "orders" is belonging. Every member of a family has an equal right to belong: hero or coward, saint or scoundrel, weak or strong, healthy or ill, dead or alive. The exclusion of a family member for any reason represents a disruption in the "Orders of Love." Disturbances in these orders and in the sense of belonging essential for wellbeing often manifest in dysfunctional patterns that reappear in a family system generation after generation. A pattern of symptoms can be related to unresolved trauma, loss or conflict in the family history. It is crucial to address such disruptions for a family to become healthy. If they are not addressed, one member of a family, often a child, may unconsciously seek to bring attention to or redress an imbalance from the past. Hellinger speaks of this as the "blind love" of a child.

Sometimes we enhance our sense of belonging by suffering in the same ways as those who came before us. Descendants may become unconsciously entangled in the difficult fate of an ancestor and draw unhappiness, failure, addiction or illness into their own lives. An example familiar to all of us is the Kennedy family. How many young men in that family system were lost before their time? All this takes place at an invisible soul level inaccessible to the rational mind. Of course anyone can become entangled but there are special issues involved when a child is given up for adoption.

The purpose of a family constellation is to reveal the hidden dynamic of such a situation and point the way toward resolution. A basic premise of family constellations work is that solutions arise and family harmony grows when the individuals involved acknowledge and respect reality and accept what fate has given them. Adopted children and adoptive parents know that the hand of fate has spun their two separate biological families into a common web. Family histories on both sides usually present many of the conditions for entanglement.

### **The biological parents**

Few mothers take lightly the heartbreaking decision to give up a child - rightly so. Just as raising a child demands responsibility and carries consequences, so does leaving a child. The mother may carry a lifelong sense of remorse or guilt. She has not only separated her child from his biological, familial, social, and in some cases spiritual, cultural, ethnic, linguistic and national roots; she has also deprived the father, grandparents, uncles and aunts, and siblings of a family member they might have loved. Her responsibility is even heavier if she has acted without the knowledge and/or consent of the father and his side of the family. If he has shared in the decision, obviously the father shares in the consequences. However, even with no conscious knowledge of the pregnancy, birth and decision to give up the child, the father will be touched on the level of his soul.

For the best outcome, both biological parents must fully relinquish their rights as parents, bear their grief and remorse consciously, and maintain an attitude of respect and gratitude toward the adoptive parents. If contact is reestablished later through a parent search, they must not reverse the orders by seeking absolution and comfort from the child they gave away. They can of course rejoice in the child's good fortune and offer support if they are able, but always with humility and continued appreciation and respect for the adoptive parents.

### **Siblings**

Subsequently if these birth parents bear other children, the shadow of the abandoned sibling might manifest in their family life in some sense of darkness or loss. The children may have a vague longing for something missing, may feel somehow insecure regarding their own places in the family, or may not feel entitled to thrive and succeed. An unconscious association of child bearing with separation and loss may prevent them from having children of their own as adults. Similarly, as often happens, when the adoptive parents bear children of their own, the adopted sibling may feel in some way less legitimate and have a weaker sense of belonging.

### **The child**

The loss of biological parents comes with additional loss of home in the sense of family, tribe, and sometimes language, spiritual tradition, and country. Family resemblance will not be traceable for an adopted child. They cannot recognize their lineage in the facial and bodily features of the adoptive family. The happy story of being "chosen" by the adoptive parents won't erase the knowledge that they were first given up by their birth parents. The difficulties of either living with or overcoming the deep pain of this loss and the resulting anger and conflicted loyalty are impossible to measure. The child is

necessarily torn between longing for and anger toward the lost family. Sometimes by doing poorly in life, the child unconsciously justifies the parental rejection. If the biological parents were victims of tragic circumstances or insurmountable difficulties the child may feel undeserving of a good life and fail to succeed in order to remain unconsciously in solidarity with them.

For adoption to succeed, adoptees must agree to life as it is. They must acknowledge with respect that life came to them through the biological parents and the land of their birth. That ancestry accompanies them into their new home, along with the child they would have become with their own people, and the unborn child of the adoptive parents, whom they replace. The child will be strengthened by finding a place in their heart for all of them. Toward the adoptive parents and new country the attitude must be one of gratitude and loving respect. When all of it is accepted and their fate is honored entirely, just as it is, then they can also say yes to a good future.

### **The adoptive parents**

On one level the adoptive parents are performing a service and acting with generosity. In another way, the decision to adopt may stem from a refusal to accept their fate, as presented in the sterility of one partner or inability to bring a child to term. It sounds so simple in a blurb on another adoption *website*<sup>2</sup> ".....make your dreams of becoming a family come true." Yet adoptions carried out solely to fill this gap in the parents' lives can lead to unsuccessful adjustment and even result in divorce and illness.

Events in the family history may influence both the failure to conceive and the decision to adopt. Examples of past problems that can affect the family soul and resonate as problems in the present are:

- An illegitimate child in a past generation or from a previous relationship may have been put up for adoption.
- Unconscious fear related to deaths during childbirth in the adoptive mother's family of origin may lead her to choose adoption
- Loyalty to a childless ancestor
- Desire to assuage the suffering of orphans in past generations

Adoptive parents' first task is to accept their childlessness. The eyes, body and gestures of the adopted child will never reflect back to them their own bloodlines. If they have not acknowledged and grieved for the natural child they can never have, the adopted child will remain a surrogate whom they will be unable to fully accept.

Success also depends to a great extent on adoptive parents' attitude toward the biological parents. Elements of judgment, pity and/or superiority are sure to evoke an undesired response, conscious or unconscious, from the adopted child. The biological parents gave the child life, something the adoptive parents were not able to do. Now, in adopting, they

benefit from tragic or difficult circumstances that presented them with the opportunity to raise a child. At the soul level adopted children still belong to the birth family and that biological inheritance flows in their blood along with the life given to them. When they are welcomed into an adoptive home, they bring in not only their own fate, but also a deep soul connection to the entire system of their family of origin. If the adoptive parents are unable to accept this reality, the child will feel at least partially rejected by them.

Our culture tends to be highly conscious of individual rights. What is more basic than the right of a child to his or her own family? The attitude that serves both birth and adoptive families best is one in which reality, that is the child's biological identity, is honored and accepted. Adoptive parents can offer their children opportunities to learn about their country of origin, its history and culture. They can offer support if they seek to initiate contact with their biological parents. Adoption then becomes an act of support for the biological parents, a stepping in to provide what they are unable to give. Then the children can bond gratefully with loving and respectful adoptive parents and no conflicting loyalties will prevent them from freely exploring and embracing their own identity.

**Using Family Constellations to address issues arising from adoption** "Setting up" both biological and adoptive families at a Family Constellations workshop is a way to gain insight into and move toward resolution for issues that may be interfering with a child's adjustment into his adoptive family.

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